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Crossing the Border with Oral History

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In a 1978 oral history, my father Gerónimo Leyva recounted the day in 1914 that he crossed the border as a four-year-old, accompanying his parents and siblings. As his older brother Ausencio walked him across the bridge from Ciudad Juárez to El Paso, he held his hand, telling him they were going "pa' los Estados Unidos" [to the United States]. Gerónimo began to cry, not knowing what that meant. As Geronimo continued to cry, the frustrated Ausencio had an idea. "I remember well that to try to cheer me up, we went into a theater on El Paso Street... I remember a man with a dummy on his leg. And he would say, 'Stick out your tongue, Toribio. Stick it out, stick it out at the politicians.' Then I started to laugh, and I was happy..."¹ My father recalled that his family—his parents, two brothers, and two sisters—simply signed their name in a ledger and walked across.

No, no usaba papers, ni nada. Pero si ponía uno su nombre... Just write down your name in a big, como se dice, un ledger algo así. Ponía su nombre la gente que pasaba. Es todo lo que necesitaban, that's all... Es lo que se nombraba 'registrarse.' Y desde entonces nos estuvimos aquí en los Estados Unidos. ("No, no documents were used, nothing. But one did put one's name... Just write down your name in a big, how do you say it, a ledger, something like that. The people who crossed put their names. It's all that was needed, that's all... It's what was called "to register." And since then, we stayed here in the United States.")²

There is no official record that the family crossed in 1914. The origin story of my paternal family in the United States began with crossing a wooden bridge without papers.

I start with my father's oral history because it was at his side that I first learned about what border crossing meant and still means to *fronterizas* and *fronterizos*, border people. Each time that I have crossed the Norte del Paso international bridge, also known as the Santa Fe bridge,

¹ Gerónimo Leyva, interviewed by Yolanda Leyva, in "Son Cosas Que Pasan en la Vida Que se Acuerda Uno Como Un Sueño; Two Oral Histories," transcript. May 1978, Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas.

² Gerónimo Leyva (1978).

connecting El Paso, Texas, U.S.A., and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico I am reminded of this story first told to me in oral history. To it, I have added my mother's stories, my son's experiences, and my own. Crossing the border represents layers of meaning, sometimes contradictory. The act of crossing represents hope, freedom, adventure, fear, and anxiety. The memories and meaning are embedded in the bridge itself.

This article suggests a new framework, border oral history theory, to understand the making of border memory and meaning and its transmission to others, whether it be through family stories or oral histories. This article is site-specific, grounded in the 2,000-mile-long region where Mexico and the United States meet, focusing on the largest binational border metroplex in the world: El Paso and Ciudad Juárez. It is not about metaphorical borderlands or abstractions. It considers how memories are embedded in particular places (in this exploratory article, the bridge, and the river). As literary critic Harry Polkinhorn writes, "the only way to understand the border is to cross it."³ It is in the crossing that power relations and resistance make themselves most visible, as demonstrated through the oral histories excerpted in this article.

While this article highlights two cities on the U.S.-Mexico border, this framework can be applied to any border where people are somehow prohibited from crossing freely. In a fascinating study of different kinds of borders (soft versus hard borders), geographer Ingolf Vogeler explores borders across the world. These include "controlled borders" where "people and goods [are] checked for national immigration and custom rules."⁴ He also analyzes "hard fortified borders" that may be fenced, fenced and walled, walled, or militarized. According to Vogeler, of 195 international land borders, 42 are fortified and of those, 57% are fortified to control migration, smuggling, drug trafficking, and terrorists. His examples of fortified borders range from Bhutan to East and West Germany to South Korea.⁵ Elizabeth Vallet, director of the Center for Geopolitical Studies at the University of Quebec-Montreal, reports that the number of border barriers grew from 15 in 1990 to 70 in 2019.⁶ In the 2014 edited anthology *Borders, Fences and Walls: State of Insecurity?*, Vallet describes the new building of border walls that "returned with a vengeance in the aftermath of 9/11."⁷ The volume includes a particularly pertinent essay by Jean-Jacques Roche, "Walls and Borders in a Globalized World: The paradoxical Revenge of Territorialization." Roche discusses the proliferation of borders post-Cold War, ultimately arguing for their usefulness.⁸ At a time when borders and border walls are growing throughout

³ Harry Polkinhorn, "Alambrada: Hacia una teoría de la escritura fronteriza," in *Borderlands Literature Towards an integrated Perspective*, ed. Harry Polkinhorn, Jose Manual Di-Bella, and Rogelio Reyes, 29-36. San Diego Institute for Regional Studies of the Californias, 1990, p 29-36. "La única forma de entender a la frontera, es cruzarla."

⁴ Ingolf Vogeler, "Types of International Borders along the U.S.-Mexico Border."

<https://www.siu.edu/GEOGRAPHY/ONLINE/Vogeler/ControlledBorders.htm> accessed on 7/13/2021.

⁵ Ingolf Vogeler, "Hard Fortified Borders."

<https://www.siu.edu/GEOGRAPHY/ONLINE/Vogeler/FortifiedBorders.htm> accessed on 7/13/2021.

⁶ Denise-Marie Ordway, "What the research says about border walls," *The Journalist's Resource*.

<https://journalistsresource.org/environment/border-walls-barriers-fences-research/> accessed 7/13/2021.

⁷ Elizabeth Vallet, ed. *Borders, Fences and Walls: State of Insecurity?* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 2016.) P.1.

⁸ Jean-Jacques Roche, "Walls and Borders in a Globalized World: The Paradoxical Revenge of Territorialization," in Elizabeth Vallet, ed. *Borders, Fences and Walls: State of Insecurity?* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 2016), pp. 105-116.

the world, understanding how border crossing and memory work through the medium of oral history becomes even more significant.

This theory uses the concept of “points of memory” to describe the physical locations where memories are created, meaning is made, and where both are embodied.⁹ The process of border memory and meaning making and transmission follows the general steps outlined below.

- Action (in this case, crossing the border) + physical space (bridge or river) creates a point of memory.
- The meaning of the memory can change over time.
- Memory & meaning are transmitted orally (family stories/ oral histories)
- The listener recalls the memory/ meaning when they interact with the physical space.
- New meaning can be created.

It is a spiral where each interaction with a point of memory by each generation adds another layer to the memory and meaning of the place as described earlier in the article. Border Oral History theory addressed the first three steps, using oral histories to understand points of memory and making meaning of the border. As a borderlander, when I listen to an oral history of someone describing crossing the border a century ago, it prompts me to remember my own experiences of crossing and I make new personal meaning of both. As an oral historian, when I listen to an oral history about crossing, I remember the other interviews that I have heard that tell a similar or different story and I make historical meaning of them.

These points of memory represent the “intersection between past and present, memory and postmemory, personal and cultural recollections.” Spitzer and Hersch argue that material objects embody the process of transmitting memory.¹⁰ While subjective, memories are passed down from generation to generation, and points of memory can serve to transmit that memory and to connect generations to that story. In this preliminary exploration of Border Oral History Theory, I contend that points of memory can be something larger and more public than a family heirloom or a photograph of our ancestors passed down within families. Along the border, physical elements, both manmade and natural, such as a bridge or the river that divides the two nations represent significant “points of memory” that elicit and embody memories that are individual, familial, political, and cultural. In this article, bridges and the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo are the points of memory created by the act of crossing and when it comes to bridges and rivers, the two are intimately related.

Four of the six oral histories referenced in this article are deposited in the collection of the Institute of Oral History at the University of Texas at El Paso. Two are deposited in the Nettie Lee Benson Library at the University of Texas at Austin. They were conducted in the 1970s with individuals born from the late 19th to the early 20th century. Most were born in Mexico. They lived most of their lives in El Paso, Texas. The interviews speak as much about “this side” (El Paso) as “that side” (Ciudad Juárez). By the time interviewers recorded the oral histories with the narrators, the narrators had witnessed momentous events. These included the Mexican

⁹ Leo Spitzer and Marianne Hirsch, “Testimonial Objects: Memory, Gender, and Transmission” in *Poetics Today* (2006) 27 (2), pp. 353-383.

¹⁰ Spitzer and Hersch, “Testimonial Objects.”

Revolution of 1910, World Wars I and II, the Great Depression of the 1930s with its deportation and repatriation campaigns, the ongoing efforts to rid the nation of undocumented workers (including the 1953-54 Operation Wetback and the ongoing struggle for civil rights). During their lifetimes, a plethora of immigration laws were enacted along with increased border enforcement.

In their personal lives, they had worked and raised families. Charles Armijo, for example, illustrates this description of his everyday life when he says in his interview,

We missed [his hometown] a lot. But we got settled here, I got working. I found a job with the Pullman Company, Pullman conductor, and different kinds of jobs. I got married after I came out of Mexico—my present wife, I married her here in El Paso. My children were born here. They're all American citizens.¹¹

Quotidian life defines and creates the border as much as the work of government officials and immigration officers. Armijo's statement that "They're all American citizens" points to the significance of nationality on the border.

The border is both a geographical place and a place of memory, seemingly fixed as a line on a map, created through military conquest, treaties, legislation, surveillance, and enforcement. Juxtaposing official narratives of the border with the memories of border crossers allows us to see the critical role that everyday people play in defining the border and making meaning of it. Using the physical space of the border, particularly the Rio Bravo/Rio Grande and the international bridges, this article develops a theory that combines both borderlands and memory theory to create a way to read, listen, and understand oral histories. Theorizing crossing the border with oral history is the child of two areas of investigation: critical border studies and memory studies. Critical Border Studies (CBS) begins with questions of power and how power works. CBS highlights the role of everyday people in creating the border. The second element of Border Oral History Theory emerges from our understanding of memory, particularly "points of memory" mentioned earlier.

While borders are designed to divide nations and peoples, everyday people challenge this division by crossing the border and making meaning of that space and that action. Their relationship to the border is shaped by their engagement with this particular space and vice versa. Crossing the border, for example, is grounded in the physical activity of walking in the case of these oral histories, as well as the legal immigration system, and symbolic understandings of sovereignty. People historically and in contemporary times cross the border, both through the immigration system and outside of it, for work, to visit family, to shop, to sightsee, to escape poverty or violence, to reunite with family, or even for adventure.

Cecilio A. Arredondo, interviewed in 1973 after having first crossed into the United States approximately 60 years earlier, remembered a childhood experience with the bridge. The family moved from Indé, Durango to Ciudad Juárez in 1909, just before the start of the Mexican

¹¹ Interview with Charles Armijo by Leon C. Metz, 1973, "Interview no. 106," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

Revolution. The Revolution was a ten-year civil war that began when the long-time dictator Porfirio Diaz announced he would not step down from the presidency. Diaz, a military hero of the war against the French occupation of Mexico, held onto power from 1877 until 1911 when he was exiled to France. The war grew out of his modernization policies that created tremendous land loss among small farmers, growing homelessness as former rural workers moved to cities seeking work, an increase in food prices, and a decrease in wages. Rural people and poor urban people rebelled and the nascent middle-class joined, often leading the Revolution to seek more power for themselves. The Arredondo family did not stay in Juárez long; they soon moved to El Paso because there were “too many people” in Juárez. Yet, the bridge continued to call to the young Arredondo.

Arredondo told interviewer David Salazar that after coming to El Paso, he crossed a bridge into Juárez. “Un puente colgante, le decían; era de cables.” It was “a hanging bridge, they called it; it had cables.” He described that he crossed “a curiosear allá,” “to nose around over there.” When he reached the other side, accompanied by a friend, they found themselves among revolutionaries. One of the men was making tortillas and offered Arredondo a tortilla with beans. “¡Deantre [sic] chamaco!” (“damn kid!”) the revolutionary told him. He remembered that this happened a day or two before the Battle of Juárez on May 11, 1911. Crossing a bridge and an unexpected gift of a tortilla with beans remained vivid memories for over six decades later.

The first bridge across the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo in the Paso del Norte region (now Juárez and El Paso) was constructed in the 1790s during the Spanish colonial period as a way to move from the southern banks to the northern banks. For millennia, the knowledge of where to ford the river was essential to the survival of Indigenous people and later Spanish expeditions. Bridges are explicit symbols of state power meant to represent national sovereignty and officially divide those who are welcomed and those who are not. Today when I cross the border from El Paso to Juárez, typically as a pedestrian, I must pass by a Mexican immigration official. Returning, I am required to present my passport to U.S. officials, either Border Patrol or sometimes military, halfway across the bridge before entering U.S. territory and before presenting my credentials a second time to Customs officials. Bridges are powerful points of memory for people who live on the border, particularly because they are intimately tied with a sense of belonging (or not) and citizenship.

Who has the privilege or opportunity to cross the bridge? Who chooses to cross the river instead and why? The stories around crossings reveal familial, political, and social realities. Take for example the oral history of Esther Chávez Leyva, Geronimo’s wife, whose experience crossing into the United States was very different from that of her husband. Her family moved to Juárez from Ciudad Chihuahua in 1918 to escape the violence of the Mexican Revolution. In 1921 the family decided to cross the border to live in El Paso. A passport showing Maria Chávez de López, and her five daughters (including nine-year-old Esther) is a valued family heirloom. The passage of the 1917 Immigration Act helped define their crossing. The legislation, intended to stop the migration of poor people into the United States, required a literacy test and an \$8 head tax. Maria paid the required head tax, as stamped on the passport.¹² In her oral history, Esther

¹² Maria Lopez de Chavez Alien Identification Card (1921). The National Archives and Records Administration; Washington D.C.; Nonstatistical Manifests and Statistical Index Cards of Aliens

relates that her father worked in Juárez so it was important for them to live near the international bridge so he could walk to work each day. While the passport, now with the descendants of her oldest sister, serves as a point of memory according to Leo Spitzer and literary scholar Marianne Hirsch, it cannot convey the full memories of that crossing.¹³ The true point of memory for Esther was crossing the bridge rather than the passport passed from generation to generation as a memento.

The border crossing had long-lasting effects on Esther. In 2000, at 87, suffering from dementia and thinking I was her sister, she spoke to me fearfully about crossing the border. What would it be like “over there” and would her parents encounter problems? As I wrote in a 2004 article, she told me “Ellos saben que somos gente buena” and when I asked her questions, trying to uncover who “they” were, she responded, “They didn’t make us take a bath when we crossed.”¹⁴ I knew about the demeaning baths forced on border crossers through my work as a borderland’s historian. Until that day, I did not know that it affected my mother and certainly not as emotionally as it did. In 1916, at the request of El Paso’s mayor, Tom Lea, Sr., the U.S. Health Department built a delousing station under the Santa Fe Bridge. Mexicans crossing the border were told to strip, and officials inspected them before they were required to enter baths, doused with kerosene and vinegar.¹⁵ Cleanliness and border crossing came together in this one act of forcing Mexican border crossers into a humiliating system, one that would foreshadow the later treatment of temporary agricultural workers crossing the border beginning in 1942 through the Bracero Program.

While Esther’s oral history reveals that the family entered through the state-sanctioned process, evidenced by the existence of a passport, her later revelation demonstrates that it was both a moment of pride and fear for her. “Somos buena gente” was code for socio-economic status. “Good people” were economically stable, educated, and often white-skinned, all characteristics of Esther’s family. The threat of being forced into the baths, however, still hung over her mother Maria, and her sisters. The bridge serves as a point of memory in these oral histories, a place where people can cross or be denied crossing.

Intimately related to the bridge as a point of memory is the river. The Rio Grande, as it is known in the United States, or the Rio Bravo, as it is known in Mexico, also serves as an important point of memory for border crossers. In these oral histories, the river serves the same function as the bridge, as a place where people can cross from one country to another for diverse reasons: to cross outside of the requirements of the immigration system, to avoid paying government fees, or even for ease of crossing. As early as 1895, the *El Paso Herald* warned that “pauper” Mexicans

Arriving at El Paso, Texas, 1905-1927. NAI 2843448; Record Group Title: Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

¹³ Spitzer and Hersch, “Testimonial Objects.”

¹⁴ Yolanda Chávez Leyva, “There is a Great Good in Returning: A Testimonio from the Borderlands.” *Gender on the Borderlands: The Frontiers Reader*, University of Nebraska Press, 2007. Antonia Castaneda, Patricia Hart, et al, editors. R

¹⁵ David Dorado Romo, *Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An Underground Cultural History of El Paso and Juarez, 1893-1923*. El Paso: Cinco Puntos Press, 2005.

were crossing the border in increasing numbers. The newspaper reported that indigent Mexicans were crossing the Rio Grande at Ysleta and “filling up the town” near El Paso.¹⁶ Crossing the river is so significant that it has given life to a racial slur—wetback—aimed at Mexicans who swim or wade across the river without papers. The first documented use of “wetback” is in a June 1920 edition of the *New York Times*.¹⁷ In 1954, the Eisenhower administration used it to name an official deportation campaign, “Operation Wetback.”¹⁸ Although it has lessened in the past two decades, people continue to cross the dangerous river to reach the United States. Each year, people drown attempting to cross the river to come to the U.S. side. In June 2019, the Border Patrol recorded seven drownings within four days as desperate asylum-seekers trapped in Ciudad Juárez, waiting for their court dates, tried to get to the U.S. side.¹⁹

For the past century, border bridges represent national sovereignty and the efforts to control the movement of people. The river exemplifies avoiding the system and its requirements. The two were not mutually exclusive in these oral testimonies. Arredondo recalled that when the river did not have water, “la gente pasaba por un ladito... no había agua y por allí pasaba la gente sin pagar nada. Ya había inmigración, pero no investigaban. La gente iba y venía con libertad.” (“When the river did not have water, “the people crossed on the side... there was no water and the people crossed there without having to pay anything. Immigration already existed, but they didn’t investigate anything. The people went and came freely.”)²⁰ Like Arredondo, people could also cross the bridge that was not monitored.

This article now turns to four specific oral histories: Charles Armijo, Enrique Acevedo, Mike Romo, and Cecilio Arredondo. Each interview illuminates how the bridge and the river serve as points of memory that reflect border identity and historical memory.

Charles Armijo: “The Revolution drove me out”

Charles Armijo moved to El Paso in December 1910 at the beginning of the Mexican Revolution. It was a violent civil war resulting in approximately 1 million deaths from a national population of 15 million. Another 1 million fled the country either permanently or temporarily. Among those who left his homeland was Armijo. Armijo recounted in his 1973 oral history that “They drove me out of Mexico—the Revolution drove me out of Mexico. I was a resident there and I had business there, but I sympathized with the government of Porfirio Diaz. When the Revolution got rough—they were killing people—we all came out. My father, my sister, and my brother, all of us came out of Mexico. And we’ve lived here ever since.” Asked “What made you decide to leave?” he answered “Well it was that or get shot. They shot all the rest of the people that were government people. They executed all of them.” The trip from his city of

¹⁶ *El Paso Herald*, January 28, 1895

¹⁷ “Wetback.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wetback>.

¹⁸ Interview with Cecilio A. Arredondo by David Salazar, 1973. “Interview no. 59.” Institute of Oral History, the University of Texas at El Paso.

¹⁹ “Migrant deaths increase,” *El Paso Times*, June 13, 2019. Accessed at <https://www.elpasotimes.com/story/news/immigration/2019/06/13/migrant-deaths-increase-el-paso-canal-drownings-freeway-pedestrian-crashes/1438845001/>

²⁰ Arredondo (1973).

Guerrero to the train that would bring his family to the border remained vivid in his memories. “I came out on a wagon over the hills, over the mountains. We had to tie the wheels one time in order to be able to go down a slope.” They then traveled by train to the Ciudad Juárez-El Paso border.²¹

Interviewer Leon Metz then inquired “What happened when you got to Juárez?” “Well, we just came over. There were no restrictions then about Mexicans coming over. They were free to come in and go out without any passport, without anything else. Everybody was allowed to go back and forth whenever they wanted.” Passports, or documents allowing a person’s passage from place to place, have existed for centuries. In the late 19th and 20th centuries and into the 21st century, the “modern” passport reflects national fears about who can claim to be a part of the United States. The southern border, then as now, was a site of tension as the United States bureaucracy attempted to categorize individuals crossing from Mexico into the United States into two broad groups: those who could cross and those who could not. The disinfecting baths mentioned above preceded other efforts to contain and control Mexican movement across the border, including the 1917 Immigration Act and the creation of the Border Patrol in 1924. When in the 1970s narrators spoke about the ease of movement across the border, it was within the context of decades of a hardening border.

Armijo’s 1973 memory that border people could move across the border “whenever they wanted” was made in the context of Armijo witnessing decades of efforts to limit and control that movement. Each generation passes stories and memories to the next about border crossings. These memories have personal, familial, and societal meanings that can overlap or contradict each other. Each generation also has memories of when it was “easier” to cross. Today, in 2021, we *fronterizas/os* remember that it was easier to cross before COVID-19. Twenty years ago, we talked about how it was easier to cross before the attacks of 9/11.

As Armijo’s oral history continued, the interviewer asked about two buildings that Armijo owned, previously officers’ quarters at an early location of Fort Bliss. The buildings are in a small historic area where a 1936 historical marker commemorates the location where “On May 4, 1598, Don Juan de Oñate, Adelantado and Captain-General, Governor of New Mexico, first named El Paso del Rio del Norte.”²² Overshadowed in history is the crossing of *fronterizos* at this same location where a conquistador crossed four centuries earlier and where Indigenous people had long forded the river. Armijo recounted “There used to be a regular way to come over without seeing the inspectors [when crossing the bridge] ... People used to wade the river, then cross the canal.”²³ In this one memory, we hear the relationship of the bridge to the river: the bridge represents the official dividing line and national sovereignty as well as control over the flow of people into the nation, while the river presents an alternative route into the nation where people enter at will.

²¹ Interview with Charles Armijo by Leon C. Metz, 1973, "Interview no. 106," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

²² Texas Historical Marker for Don Juan De Oñate and El Paso Del Rio Norte.jpg accessed at [File:Texas Historical Marker for Don Juan De Oñate and El Paso Del Rio Norte.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#)

²³ Armijo interview (1973).

As the oral history ended, the interviewer stated, “You mentioned that Juárez and El Paso were practically the same town, that people could cross very easily. When did that start to change? When did they have to start with the passports?” Ninety-one-year-old Charles Armijo answered, “I believe it was about 20 years ago, as far as I can remember. I can’t remember a lot of things.” Despite this statement, the memories of people easily crossing the border, either via the bridge or the river, remained strong in his mind.

Enrique Acevedo: “The people crossed when they wanted.”

Enrique Acevedo was 76 when he was interviewed for the Institute of Oral History. Early in the interview, in fact as part of his opening narration, he stated “Soy fronterizo...” (“I am a borderlander.”) Borders profoundly shape how people see themselves. “Yo soy originario del estado de Sonora. Soy fronterizo porque nací en la frontera con los Estado Unidos en el año de 1898. Nací en la ciudad de Nogales, Sonora, México. Tuve la dicha de nacer exactamente en la frontera, pues la casa en que yo nací (según me dijeron mis padres y la conocí yo después) estaba en la línea internacional, o sea la calle internacional que divide Nogales, Sonora, con Nogales, Arizona.” After remembering that his house faced the United States, he concluded, “Así es que realmente soy internacional.” (“I am a native of the state of Sonora. I am a borderlander because I was born on the border with the United States in 1898. I was born in the city of Nogales, Sonora, Mexico. I had the good fortune to be born exactly on the border, well the house in which I was born (according to my parents and later, I knew it) as on the international line, o the international street that divides Nogales, Sonora, from Nogales, Arizona... I am truly international.)²⁴

When Acevedo was five years old, the family relocated to Mexico City and later to Chiapas in the south of Mexico. In 1903, they returned to northern Mexico to Ciudad Juárez because of his father’s employment with the federal customs house. Acevedo described El Paso and Juárez as “poblaciones pequeñas” (“tiny settlements”) with unpaved streets and horse-drawn carriages, and a few churches but few schools. Juárez was surrounded by alfalfa fields and grape orchards, fields of wheat and corn. “Era una población tranquila [en donde se] vivía muy a gusto,” (“It was a tranquil town where you could live comfortably”) he recalled. El Paso was also a tranquil place. He remembered in detail the historic 1909 meeting between the Mexican President Porfirio Díaz and the U.S. President William H. Taft. He also remembered the Mexican Revolution, its economic and ideological foundations, and the Battle of Juárez in 1911.

When revolutionary leader Pancho Villa took control of Juárez in 1913, Acevedo and his father fled, fearing that Villa would execute his father for working as the City Clerk and speaking against Villa. “El [Villa] tomó a Juárez como a las 2:00 o 3:00 de la mañana, y nosotros salimos de la casa para El Paso como as las 2:00 de la tarde, mi padre y yo, los dos en bicicleta, y pudimos cruzar para acá. Y llegamos aquí sanos y salvos.” (“He [Villa] took Juárez around 2 or 3 in the morning, and we left the house for El Paso around 2 in the afternoon, my father and I, both on bicycles and we were able to cross over here. And we arrived safe and sound.”) Acevedo was 15 years old when he crossed the border to El Paso, where he would spend the next 68 years. As

²⁴ Interview with Enrique Acevedo by Robert H. Novak, 1974, "Interview no. 130," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

an adult, he began working for a local department store, The White House, eventually promoted to a merchandise buyer who traveled to New York and Chicago.

Like Armijo, Acevedo also declared that there was no need for a passport when he first came to the United States. He also described the diversity of bridges that existed in the early twentieth century.

Bueno, no había pasaportes, la gente pasaba cuando quería. Se pagaba una cantidad muy pequeña para pasar en los puentes, que eran de madera. Cuando el río estaba completamente seco, la gente pasaba por abajo en los carruajes para no pagar ni lo que se cobraba en el puente. Los puentes eran muy angostos; había dos puentes de madera. Había un puente de acero del Ferrocarril Nacional o del Central Mexicano, y había otros puentes para el antiguo Ferrocarril Corralitos, que después [se llamó] Ferrocarril Noroeste de Mexico. (Well, there were no passports, the people crosses when they wanted. You paid a small amount, very small, to cross the bridges, which were wooden. When the river was completely dry, the people crossed underneath in carriages in order not to pay what was charged at the bridge. The bridges were very narrow; there were two wooden bridges. There was a steel bridge for the National Railroad or the Central Mexican [railroad], and there were other bridges for the old Corralitos Railroad, that later [was called] the Northeast Railroad of Mexico.”

As in other oral histories, the bridge and the river were intertwined in the memories of the narrators, linked to the concept of freedom of movement between nations.

While passports specifically appear in the narratives, they are a symbol of a larger system of immigration and control of Mexicans crossing. In his oral history, Acevedo remembered that before the Mexican Revolution of 1910, there no immigration restrictions.

En esa época, hasta 1912 o 1913--se puede decir antes de la Revolución Mexicana--no había restricciones de inmigración. Todos pasábamos de un lado para el otro sin pasaporte. No había pasaportes. había unos cuantos empleados aduanales para cuidar los contrabandos tanto en el lado mexicano como en el lado americano. El río casi todo el año estaba seco. Nada más poco más o menos del mes de abril al mes de agosto traía una poca de agua, pues en mayo empezaban llegar las grandes corrientes del hielo del río que vienen de las montañas de Colorado. En esas épocas había grandes inundaciones. El río se desbordaba, inundaba lo que es ahora Córdova, la parte baja de Juárez, [la] parte baja de El Paso.” (“In that era, until 1912 or 1913—we can say before the Mexican Revolution—there were no immigration restrictions. We all crossed from one side to another without a passport. There were no passports, there were a few customs employees to watch out for contraband as much on the Mexican side as on the American side. The river was dry almost all year. Only in the months of April until August, more or less, did it have a little water. Well in May the great snow from the river that came from the Colorado mountains began. In those times there

were great floods. The river overflowed its banks, it flooded what is now Córdova, the lower part of Juárez, the lower part of El Paso.)²⁵ The conflicting relationship of border people with the river, which when dry allowed people to cross freely and when flooding brought destruction, shows the power of nature over national sovereignty.

The idea expressed in Acevedo of being “internacional” because of the border is also expressed in Acevedo’s oral history. In this excerpt, the bridge is less visible but implied in his crossing back and forth to attend social events. Even though he had lived in El Paso for over sixty years, Acevedo continued to be very involved in organizations in Juárez. He told the interviewer that although the United States was his country, El Paso was his city, and he loved it very much, he continued to “live socially” in Juárez. He said, “casi nació allí, tengo muy buenas amistades...” (I was almost born there, I have very good friends...) To demonstrate that he was connected to the city across the border, he went on to say: “A eso se debe que sea yo miembro hace 35 años del Club de Leones de Juárez. Soy director de la comisión de relaciones internacionales, que sirve bastante para fomentar las relaciones de los clubes americanos con los clubes de México. Me invitan a muchas cosas. (‘That is why I have been a member of the Lions Club in Juárez for 35 years. I’m the director of the international relations commission, which serves to promote the relationship between the American clubs and the clubs in Mexico. I am invited to many things.’)

Mike Romo: “A beautiful way of living”

The next oral history narrator is Mike Romo who was born in 1892 in the small southwestern Texas town of Brackettville, 30 miles from the border city of Del Rio. When asked, “So you were born very close to the border?” he responded, “Oh yes. In fact, we used to go to Eagle Pass every Sunday just to go over to Ciudad Porfirio Diaz. Every Sunday my grandmother and my father would drive over there.”²⁶ Romo immediately associated living on the border with crossing the border. Del Rio, he remembered, “was not more than 25 houses in the whole town. I can’t remember it very well, but we used to go when they had 16th of September celebrations and things of that kind.” When asked it is was customary for Mexican people to cross during holidays, he answered “Yes, yes.”

Before moving to El Paso in 1906, Romo was already familiar with crossing the border, as mentioned above. He recalled that in Del Rio “there was no bridge then or anything. You had to go in a little boat. The same here. [El Paso] They used to have a boat here before this bridge was built.” His oral history reflects a long history of crossing back and forth between border cities and his reflection on the relationship between residents and towns on both sides of the border reflects a very positive atmosphere, one of freedom to cross. “But I can remember coming from Juárez across the bridge on Stanton Street there and they never asked you for any identification. They didn't ask you for anything. In fact, there wasn't but one old man and he was half asleep in the soapbox back there. You could go and come back, and nobody ever bothered you and you could bring whatever you wanted, and they never said anything at all.” I can remember well, I was going to that Calle del Cementerio, going toward the cemetery I remember coming at 2 or 3

²⁵ Acevedo (1974).

²⁶ Interview with Mike Romo by Oscar J. Martinez, 1976, "Interview no. 215," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

in the morning from these dances--no bother, nobody ever bothered me. Once in a while I'd meet two or three guys drinking a little tequila and, well, I wanted to be friendly with them and I'd get over there and make out like I'd take a drink and then go on about my way. We walked all the way to the bridge. Nobody ever bothered you in those days."

Romo's family was transnational: his father was from a small town in the northern Mexican state of Coahuila. As a young man, he crossed into the United States and went to Bracketville where he met and married Romo's mother. Later, when asked if there was much dating between people on one side and the other, he told a story of his "first love affair." I went over [to Juárez] and asked the mother if I could bring my girlfriend over to a dance. On Overland Street, there was a club called La Fraternal and we'd hold all our dances there. I went over, and yes, she could come, provided her older sister and the other one next to her (my wife was the middle one) and [also] attended the dance. But the Mexican people here were *revueltas* (interrelating) all the time. It was different then. That is, there's a certain animosity today between the Mexicans on the Mexican side and the Mexicans on this side, as I see it. In those days there was nothing. You'd go and come back. A friend would bring you over to dinner or you'd go over there. It was nice--a beautiful way of living."²⁷

Around 1912, he recalled "that it was Pancho Villa that started this idea about passports, because we didn't have it on the American side. You could come over all the time and they wouldn't ask you any questions or anything. But Pancho Villa had some clerks on the Mexican side, and they had a little card. In order for you to go to Juárez--that meant Mexicans or Americans or Negroes or anybody --anybody that went to Juárez had to stop at this place and buy a card for identification. It would cost you 50 cents. Now, I bought one of those. Well, as I understand, the reason that Pancho Villa did that was because a lot of the federals came over to El Paso, and he was afraid that they would infiltrate--go back in there. Of course, they did not fingerprint you; they only got your name and address and so forth, and they gave you this permit to go to Judea. That was a money-making plan for Pancho Villa because he made plenty of money on those cards." Romo remembered that about six months later, the U.S. side also instituted passports. "But we never had them here before. The fact is, you could go down there and come back nobody bothered you over there in Juárez... They didn't ask you, 'What's your citizenship?' They did ask you, 'What have you got with you?' No questions asked. You just came on over." Romo's narrative brings together the idea of crossing with personal and romantic relationships.

Cecilio Arredondo: "the people went and came perfectly"

The final narrator is Cecilio Arredondo who arrived in Juárez in 1909 from Indé, Durango, as described earlier. His merchant father decided to leave Juárez because "estaban allí muchísima gente." ("there were too many people.") Also, his father decided to move to the U.S. so that his son Cecilio could study. In Indé, he told the interviewer his family completed only elementary

²⁷ Mike Romo (1976). During Prohibition, Romo recalled "There were many people who wanted the bridge closed by 11:00" so that Americans could not drink in Juárez. "I think they tried it for one or two nights, but it didn't work." Either closing the bridge or attempting to close it is a related topic. Demonstrations originating on both sides of the border have closed the bridges many times.

school because that is all there was. Each oral history illuminates the motivations to cross the border as well as the circumstances the narrators confronted when crossing.

When the interviewer asked Arredondo about a bridge he mentioned (in the excerpt included earlier where he ran into revolutionaries), he said “Está de la "esmelda" para acá. ¿O sea, sabe dónde estaba al fort viejo? ... Pasamos para el otro lado. Era para la gente que pasaba, porque en ese entonces no había escrúpulos de migración. Había los Rangers, esos sí, pero esos cuidaban yo creo más bien contrabando, cosas de esas.” (“It’s on this side of the smelter. Or do you know where the old fort was?... We crossed to the other side. It was for the people who crossed because in those times there were no scruples about immigration. There were the [Texas] Rangers, yes, but they cared more about contraband, those kinds of things.”) Like other narrators, we learn that people could easily cross, but goods were surveilled.

Like previous narrators, Arredondo remembered that “la gente iba y venía perfectamente, no la molestaban nunca.” (“The people went and came perfectly, no one bothered them ever.”) When the interviewer mentioned that the U.S. government began to charge to cross the bridge in 1945, Arredondo corrected him. “Fue ya del ’18; ya estaban cobrando.” (“It was in ’18, they were already charging.”) He was probably referring to the 1917 Immigration Act that instituted an \$8 head tax for immigrants crossing the border, Arredondo recalled that when he started to legalize his status, immigration officials did not find a record of his crossing. He crossed back into Juárez and paid the \$18 tax. By the time he married, “estaba todo legalizado, toda la movida legalizada.” (“everything was legalized, the whole affair was legalized.”)

Conclusion

Border making has been conceived as a top-down process that often begins with territorial conflict and military encounters. The winner then creates a treaty that incorporates the new border. Once the border has been delineated, typically through the work of surveyors, the real task of maintaining the borderline begins. On both sides of the new border, subsequent legislation lays out who and what can cross and how. The governments then create a bureaucracy of administrators and border officials, such as ICE and the Border Patrol in the case of the United States, to enforce the legislation and policies. None of this goes without contestation. Borders are always problematic for the nations attempting to enforce them and for people seeking to cross them.

Making meaning of the border, however, is an action and right claimed by individuals, families, and border communities. The act of crossing the border and, as significantly, the act of remembering that crossing works to define the meaning of the border among day-to-day people. Furthermore, personal stories and histories evoke much larger national and international histories. As a child, and as someone who grew up on the border within a family who experienced the trauma of repatriation during the Great Depression, crossing the border from Mexico into the United States following a day of shopping in Ciudad Juárez was always infused with fear for me. It still is even though I am in my sixties, a U.S. citizen, a professor, and should have no reason to worry. Family stories about crossing as well as my own experiences are embedded in my memory, and my body.

Crossing the border means much more than the simple act of walking or driving across the international boundary. Crossing creates both a place of potential and hope and despair and crisis. Even a casual trip across the international boundary can evoke profound feelings and reactions around issues of identity, authenticity, and nationalism. By listening to border oral histories, we can begin to understand the complexity of both interacting with the border and remembering that interaction.

Border oral history theory challenges the top-down approach to borders by providing a model for understanding how borderlanders remember, make meaning of, and transmit memories of the border. Physical objects and locations like bridges embody the stories and memories of crossing the border. In a time of increasing numbers of borders and increasing border walls globally, oral historians have an opportunity to increase our understanding of these barriers and what they mean in people's lives by listening to the stories that they tell.